



Living With Spirits

BY JIM POLLARD

The number of freelance journalists and photographers based in Southeast Asia has declined dramatically in recent years as the impact of the Internet has hammered the financial strength of newspapers and magazines around the world.

One of those still making a go of being a freelancer is Ben Davies, a Brit who arrived in Bangkok about two decades ago. Davies has “survived” because he has several strings to his bow – he is both a writer on everything about the Asian business scene to the illegal trade in wildlife (which was the topic of his last book, ‘Black Market’, published by Earth Aware Editions in the US), and an accomplished photographer.

Davies has just launched his fifth book, “Living With Spirits”, which is based on five years travelling around Thailand to document the Kingdom’s all-pervasive spirit world.

The result is a fascinating glimpse at the diverse thinking and mystical beliefs that are deeply rooted in Thai society... shamans sacrificing pigs and chickens, to astrologers, tattoo masters, palm readers and animist rituals.

“I was amazed at how powerful the influence of the spirits still is,” he says. “We tend to think of animism as being the preserve of uneducated rice farmers. Yet it permeates every level of [Thai] society.”

In the north near the Thai-Burma border Davies witnessed a spirit doctor exorcising a jungle demon from a young boy, then burying the offending spirit in a hole in the forest. Another day, in Nakhon Sawan, he watched a “medium” cut his tongue with a sword and write the words of spirits on a sheet of paper with his own blood.

“There is a very dark side to Thailand that is often overlooked,”

says Davies, whose interest in the spirit world grew from two minor incidents just after he arrived in Bangkok; he caught dengue fever and then fell down a manhole, which prompted locals to say he had been cursed.

A level-headed father of two, little prone to flights of fancy, he has witnessed countless animist rituals but still retains a healthy sense of scepticism.

“I don’t believe everything. But the next time I visit the city pillar I will make an offering of a pig’s head and a bottle of whisky to the spirits,” he says with a grin.

Perhaps Davies has lived here too long. “Living With Spirits - A Journey into the Heart of Thailand” is available at Asiabooks. His other photos can be seen at: www.bendaviesphotos.com ■

Note: Jim Pollard worked as a researcher & editor on the book “Black Market”.



“We tend to think of animism as being the preserve of uneducated rice farmers. Yet it permeates every level of [Thai] society.”

